
UNIT 30 CONTEMPORARY MARXIST THINKING (INDIAN)

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30.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to understand the following:

- the uniqueness of Indian Marxists' thinking
- the positions of Indian Marxists in relation to historical materialism, stages of Indian history, character of Indian independence, Indian State and the ruling class, foreign policy and the Congress, the caste system and nationality, and
- the position of Indian Marxists on strategy.

30.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit deals with Contemporary Indian Marxist thinking. It covers the main Communist parties i.e. the CPI, the CPI (M) and the CPI (ML). These parties follow Marxism and Leninism as their guidelines. The positions of these parties on the objectives listed above will give you a general understanding of Contemporary Marxist thinking in India.

30.2 UNIQUENESS OF INDIAN MARXIST THINKING

Marxist thinking in India is not as developed as in the West. In India, Marxism is the product of Western intellectual tradition. Logic of intellectual development in West had reached a particular stage of culmination. Renaissance, reformation and enlightenment led to a creative phase in Western intellectual history which is known as the Marxist phase. The foundation of this new thinking was laid by Marx and Engels. In India we do not have such a rich intellectual tradition. Our intellectual tradition allows very little space for original thinking. It is a difficult task on the part of a Marxist to be very original and creative. Despite this the Indian Marxist tradition is not so bad as compared to many other States in third world countries. It has a history of half a century. Marxist intellectuals in India basically remain within the Communist Parties. Some of them though, are found outside the fold of these parties.

30.3 MARXISTS AND HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

Communists in India have always been busy in trying to look for answers to problems in a Marxist framework. They have had very little time to do philosophical thinking. Their concern has been basically in the application of historical materialism to Indian situations. Most Indian Marxists have a dialogue with Marx's own writings on Indian society. In constructing Indian history, Marx has made two important points. First, Indian society before the British rule was a stagnant society. Village community and caste society created a social framework for making Indian economy a unchanging economy. Secondly, British rule was a blessing in disguise which helped in destroying this aspect of Indian society and created circumstances for regeneration. Marx's own statement is given below: "The historic pages of their rule in India report hardly anything beyond that destruction. The work of regeneration hardly transpires through a heap of ruins. Nevertheless it has begun."

The British rule cannot stop the changes introduced by it. Changes would bring national unity. Moreover, introduction of freedom of press and English education have brought about a radical change in Indian society. An educated class with new ideas would be playing an important role in the political transformation of a society.

Marxists have a historical scheme for understanding any history. There are certain stages in history like primitive communism, slavery, feudalism and capitalism. Historical development of each society experiences these stages. Some of the prominent communists themselves applied the historical scheme in a mechanical manner. S. A. Dange, in his book, *India: From Primitive Communism to Slavery* accepted the stage of slavery in Indian history. But most of the Indian communists reject this point and try to understand Indian history in a creative manner. All of them agree to a point that Indian history does not have a stage of slavery. Primitive tribal society gets transformed into a caste society without experiencing the stage of slavery. Indian feudalism integrated caste system into it. It has similarities with European feudalism because it does not have serfdom which is an integral part of European feudalism.

Check Your Progress I

- Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) Check the answer with that given at the end of the unit.

1) On which point do Indian Marxists differ with S. A. Dange?

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30.4 INDIAN MARXISTS ON COLONIAL RULE

All Indian Marxists agree to a point that India experienced capitalism under colonial rule. British rule brought certain radical transformation in the Indian society. It destroyed certain social institutions like the village community which had become an obstacle to social progress. Colonial capitalism created problems for Indian progress. Colonial policy affected the artisan community. They were reduced to being paupers by the deindustrialisation policy of colonial rule. One has to recognise the positive aspects of British rule which created certain conditions in bringing modern industries. When railway was introduced in India, Marx was hopeful that India would experience a stage of industrialisation even though British rule did not intend to do so. Marx observed, "But when you have once introduced machinery into the locomotion of a country, which possesses iron and coal, you are unable to withhold it from its fabrication. You

cannot maintain a net of railways, all those industrial processes necessary to meet the immediate and current wants of railway locomotion, and out of which there must grow the application of machinery to those branches of industry not immediately connected with railways. The railway system will therefore, become in India, truly, the forerunner of modern industries.... Modern industry resulting from the railway system "will dissolve the hereditary divisions of labour, upon which rest the Indian castes, those decisive impediments to Indian progress and Indian power."

British rule could not stop the wheel of economic progress in India. India experienced the stage of capitalism. Large scale industrialisation took place between two world wars. This gave an economic strength to Indian capitalist class for supporting the demand for independence.

Check Your Progress 2

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) Check the answer with that given at the end of the unit.

1) What were the negative and positive inputs of the British rule as regards the Indian Society?

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30.5 INDIAN MARXISTS AND CHARACTER OF INDIAN INDEPENDENCE

Once India achieved independence what is the character of Indian independence became a debatable point among Marxists. Controversy over the issue brought differences within communists to the surface. There are basically three opinions on the issue of independence. A section of the communists declared Indian independence as fake. India was a colony under the British rule and after independence turned into a neo-colony of British and American imperialism. Second group is of the opinion that India has acquired true independence through the path of independent economic development and such a India is going to be completely independent of the imperialist world. Third group remains in between the first and second. They accept the independence of India but there is always a threat from imperialism which cannot be washed away.

30.6 INDIAN MARXISTS ON INDIAN STATE AND RULING CLASS

30.6.1 Split in the Indian Communist Movement

This led to difference of opinion among Indian communists on the question of Indian State and ruling class. The function of the Congress party in the post-independence history remains a debatable point. Political transformation after independence created a lot of debate among communists and eventually led to a split in the party. Each group remained as a political trend within the party. The Communist party functioned as a platform till 1964. Split in the international communist movement accentuated the differences further. Formal split in the Communist party took place in 1964. This did not stop there. Split within split occurred in the year of 1967. At present there are many splintered groups in India. But there are three major groups in communist politics whose differences of opinion on the issue of state, planning and ruling class need a serious discussion.

30.6.2 Indian Marxists and Instrumental Approach to the State

Indian communists have an instrumental approach to the question of the state. That state is an instrument of the ruling classes and it works in safeguarding and furthering their interests. Otherwise each Communist Party has a political theory of Indian state. Understanding of ruling class helps in characterising Indian state. There are three Communist Parties: CPI, CPI(M) and CPI(ML). We have to understand each party's viewpoint on the character of Indian State. The position of the CPI is as follows: "The State in India is the organ of the class rule of the national bourgeoisie as a whole, in which the big bourgeoisie holds powerful influence. This class rule has links with the landlords. These factors give rise to the reactionary pulls in the State Power."

This statement has two parts. First, the big bourgeoisie holds the state power which is the national bourgeoisie. At the same time they have not snapped their relations with the landlords in rural India. This helps in the rise of reactionary forces in Indian politics. They recognise the progressive character of the national bourgeoisie. The ruling Congress Party is the party of this class, that is why it can function as the instrument of social progress. Basically, the congress party can fight feudal interests in rural India.

The position of CPI(M) is as follows: "The present Indian state is the organ of the class rule of the bourgeoisie and the landlords led by big bourgeoisie who are increasingly collaborating with foreign finance capital in the pursuit of capitalist path of development. This class character essentially determines the rôle and function of State in the life of the country."

For CPI(M), the ruling class is composed of the capitalists and landlords. They both share power in Indian state. Moreover, Indian capitalists are collaborating with foreign capitalists. State is an instrument of capitalists and landlords. The Congress Party is a party of these classes. It has a very little capacity to play a progressive role in Indian politics. There is no question of social, economic and political progress unless this state is undermined and destroyed and replaced by a state of People's Democracy.

CPI(ML) is not a homogeneous political grouping. There are many groups working in the platform. Dominant viewpoint in the party is as follows. "India under Congress rule is only nominally independent, in fact it is nothing more than a semi-colonial and semi-feudal country. The Congress Party Administration represents the interests of the Indian feudal princes, big landlords, and bureaucrat-comprador capitalists." In other words, Indian ruling class has a comprador character. They are subordinated to the American and Russian imperialism. Capitalists are very friendly with the landlords. Indian state is an instrument of these classes which do not work in the interests of Indian people. It is a reactionary state. Indian state and the Congress Party cannot become instruments of social change.

Both CPI and CPI(M) give certain autonomy to the Indian state. Within the present class configuration, state can play a decisive role in the development of a society. Both recognize the importance of planning. That planning in Indian economy supplements the strength of Indian capitalist class. Indian capitalist class because of its belated growth does not have sufficient capital and technology for taking an independent path. State sector or public sector can provide them a helping hand in their development. Public Sector in Indian economy has gone for capital intensive industries. That helps the Indian capitalist class not to be so much dependent on foreign capital. It gives them certain manoeuvring capacity in the international economy.

Check Your Progress 3

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) Check your answers with those at the end of the unit.

1) Which classes constitute the ruling class according to the CPI (M)?

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30.7 INDIAN MARXISTS AND FOREIGN POLICY

In the arena of foreign policy, both CPI and CPI(M) support the non-alignment policy. India is not a member of any bloc, neither Western Soviet. India after independence takes an independent path in international politics. That helps them to protect national interest in a better manner. It is another matter that it receives economic aid from Soviet Union and America.

30.8 INDIAN MARXISTS AND THE CONGRESS

As the Congress Party under the leadership of Nehru took a forthright and independent stand on the role of planning and foreign policy, it created confusion in the minds of the communist parties. CPI believes that Congress under the leadership of Nehru represented the interests of the national bourgeoisie. The line continued till the Indira Gandhi period. The Congress Party pursued the policy of non-alignment. It gave priority to public sector in Indian economy. Here the perception of CPI(M) differs slightly from CPI. That non-aligned policy is the result of the character of Indian capitalist class which is a reasonably developed class in all the third world countries. They pursued the policy of planning to keep India autonomous of international capital. There is a possibility that Indian capitalist class goes deeper into economic crisis. It will depend more and more on foreign capital like World Bank and IMF.

CPI and CPI(M) agree that the Congress Party is a secular party but very often compromises with communal forces. Domination of single personalities like Nehru, Indira Gandhi in Congress politics makes the party more authoritarian. Congress Party under the leadership of Indira Gandhi has never faced any organisational election. That is why CPI(M) characterises the Congress Party as an authoritarian party, although CPI does not agree with this characterisation.

Both CPI and CPI(M) do not have any political theory of communalism and caste system. Most of the leaders during the national movement acquired certain understanding out of their experience. On both these issues, their understanding does not differ from liberal traditions. India is a multi-community society. Inter-communal harmony is a must for practicing class politics. With radicalisation of mass politics, communal politics will retreat.

Check Your Progress 4

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with those given at the end of the unit.

1) Whose interests does the Congress represent according to the CPI?

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30.9 INDIAN MARXISTS AND THE CASTE SYSTEM

On the issue of caste system, their perception has a historical dimension. In the process of transformation from a tribal to a peasant society, India has integrated into caste systems. Castes are basically occupational groups based on the division of labour. Capitalism would transform the caste system. Class politics will be able to check caste politics. Caste politics is a part of the ruling class politics. As B.T. Ranadive gives his observation, "The continuity of religiosity, communalism and casteism was embedded in the compromise that permitted the continuation of antiquated land relations."

Progressively their understanding on the caste question is changing. Caste system has to be fought on the plane of ideological and political level. Caste legitimacy allows upper castes to oppress the lower castes. Ideological hegemony of caste system must be fought. Both CPI and CPI(M) support the reservation policy on the caste basis to destroy the iniquitous caste system.

Check Your Progress 5

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

1) What do the Marxists suggest for fighting casteism?

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30.10 INDIAN MARXISTS AND NATIONALITY

CPI, CPI(M) and CPI(ML) all support the freedom of nationalities. Indian nation is a collection of different nationalities. Each nationality is based on a linguistic line supported by cultural traditions. That is why all communists agree to a point that Indian state should be a federal state for helping in allowing the cultural groups to flower. Ethnicity is a question which has come to Indian politics in the 1980s. Tribal communities because of their ethnic background have been demanding a tribal state like Jharkhand in Central India. Communist Parties agree to a point that all ethnic groups must be allowed to function in an autonomous region, which is guaranteed by the Constitution. There is no such clear thinking on the question of ethnicity in communist circles

30.11 INDIAN MARXISTS ON THE STRATEGY OF MOBILISATION

On the plane of political mobilisation, CPI and CPI(M) have adopted a single strategy whereas the CPI(ML) has a confused opinion. Some groups in CPI(ML) do not like to adopt the parliamentary path while some others, specifically IPF (Indian People's Front) accept it. All the parties face a problem of reconciling between the parliamentary line and revolutionary mass line. CPI has taken to electoral politics without any hesitation whereas CPI(M) has tried to reconcile between electoral politics and mass politics, but progressively has become a victim of electoral politics. CPI(ML) has been confused over the issue. But CPI(ML) has been able to take low castes and lower classes together for political mobilisation. In the case of Bihar, exercising their franchise becomes a radical slogan because poor from low castes are usually not allowed to vote. In a complex caste ridden society, a strategy of class politics is not an easy task.

In the process of political struggle, a clearer strategy can emerge.

Check Your Progress 6

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

1) Point out the differences among the Indian Marxist on the strategy of mobilisation.

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30.12 LET US SUM UP

Indian Marxist thinking does not have its own intellectual tradition, unlike the Marxist thinking of Europe. There have been existing differences of opinion among Indian Marxists on the periodization of Indian history. But they agree to a point that there never existed a stage of slavery in Indian history. They also agree that India experienced capitalism under colonial rule. On the character of Indian independence, on the nature of Indian state and ruling class, their differences on these issues even resulted in the split in the communist movement in India. Caste system has been perceived by the Indian Marxists as a sort of division. While the CPI and the CPI(M) are not opposed to the parliamentary method of political mobilisation, the CPI(M) has been taking a confused stand on the strategy of mobilisation.

30.13 SOME USEFUL BOOKS

B.T. Ranadive. *The Independence Struggle and After*, New Delhi, 1988.
Mathew Kurian, ed., *India — State and Society*, New Delhi, 1975.

30.14 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

1) See sub-section 30.4

Check Your Progress 2

1) See sub-section 30.4.1

Check Your Progress 3

1) See section 30.6.2

Check Your Progress 4

1) See section 30:8

Check Your Progress 5

1) See section 30.9

Check Your Progress 6

1) See section 30.11